



GINA FERRAZZI Los Angeles Times

EMPLOYED AGAIN: Anoush Gulasarian, left, and her fiancé, Karen Mesropyan, are two of nine temporary workers hired by Abex Display Systems through an L.A. County jobs program who got permanent positions.

SMALL BUSINESS

County jobless program works for employers too

Hundreds of firms get federally subsidized temps earning \$10 an hour

CYNDIA ZWAHLEN

A little-known Los Angeles County jobs program is paying \$10 an hour to several thousand workers at temporary jobs in businesses around Los Angeles, including hundreds of small firms.

Using federal economic stimulus funds, the county is hiring the jobless to work at these companies for up to a year. In exchange, the businesses provide training, build job skills and get extra workers at little or no cost.

For small businesses hard-hit by the economic downturn, the chance for extra workers is a welcome boost — even if it means providing training and work space for the temps. So far, 435 businesses have gotten 2,574 temporary workers, county officials said.

"This is huge for small business," said county Supervisor Don Knabe, who spearheaded the initiative. "So many small businesses are on the fringe of being able to stay afloat, this gives them the opportunity to keep their businesses going."

In North Hollywood, Abex Display Systems has hired 98 temporary workers through the program since September and has converted nine temps to permanent employees so far.

The trade-show display manufacturer has relied on the temporary workforce to help handle a slow but growing recovery in sales. The growth has followed a dramatic drop in revenue during the recession that forced it to lay off more than half of its employees.

"It has helped Abex move forward and stabilize," said Kimberly Pfeifer, vice president of sales at the company,

\$158 million

Los Angeles County federal stimulus dollars earmarked for temporary jobs program

2,574

Number of temporary workers placed at local businesses so far

435

Number of local participating businesses

Source: South Bay Workforce Investment Board

which has 68 permanent employees, down from about 150.

Abex workers Anoush Gulasarian, 26, and her fiancé, Karen Mesropyan, 23, of West Hills, were hired permanently after their stints as county-paid temps. She started as a receptionist and is now in sales. He works in customer service.

They had been on welfare after losing their previous jobs. "I am finally on my own two feet, able to provide for my child and myself," said Gulasarian, who has a 2-year-old daughter.

The county's plan is to allocate up to \$158 million in federal stimulus money to put 10,000 low-income people — many on welfare — into public, private and nonprofit jobs. Organizers hope the program will lead to permanent jobs or at least provide training and work experience for participants. The

program is set to end Sept. 30, but Congress is considering legislation to extend it.

A county website — www.employmentstimulus.org — provides detailed information for businesses seeking temporary employees from the program, for unemployed job-seekers seeking to participate and for younger adults seeking summer employment.

CDR Financial Services in Long Beach, an insurance services and collections firm, has added 20 subsidized workers to its staff of 20 and continues to interview more. The company will make some positions permanent.

"Before, I was worried: How am I going to grow?" said Walter Larkins, the company's president. "Now we're in the mode where can actually bring on more clients."

The county program draws temporary workers from a handful of sources. Most are single mothers or fathers in the county's welfare-to-work programs.

Latoya Marsette, 28, of Hawthorne, a single mother of a 4-year-old son, was on welfare after she left her FedEx job in early 2009 when her hours were cut to 15 a week. She said she fell into a funk but eventually landed a temporary job through the county program at a Fox Rent a Car office, where she started as a greeter.

Marsette is now working as an administrative assistant and said she hopes to be hired permanently. "I am smiling every day," she said. "It's good to have something to look forward to, going to work and supporting me and my son."

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